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ABSTRACT

The debate between the whole language approach and the word-centered skills approach to beginning reading instruction is likely to continue into the next decade, so it seems crucial that educators at all levels understand thoroughly the views held by the participants. Advocates of the whole language approach believe effective readers see meaning as they read and that reading skills are learned by reading. Whole language proponents use more global observation assessments and are concerned with giving background to readers. Advocates of the word-centered skills approach want to provide readers with the skills necessary to decode meaning from individual words. Thus they focus on developing sight vocabulary and phonics, break language into smaller units to aid readers in developing skills, assess progress by demonstrating proficiency for each skill, and control the readers' exposure to new vocabulary. (RS)

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Understanding the Current Great Debate in Reading

Jerry L. Milligan

Although there have been several controversies among professionals in the field of reading, there have been very few great debates. I regard the last truly great debate in reading to be the debate which commenced after the publication of the book Learning to Read: the Great Debate by Jeanne Chall (1967). After surveying studies on the effectiveness of various reading approaches, she concluded that beginning reading programs which focused initially on breaking the alphabetic code were more effective than beginning reading programs that did not.

Other issues, such as whether word attack skills should be taught before or after some sight words are taught, and whether consonants or vowels should be taught first, seem to me to be somewhat minor issues which were a reflection of the time.

Currently being debated are two distinctly different philosophies about the way reading should be taught. These views differ so fundamentally that a debate is raging among professionals. This debate is so heated at times that conflicts among professionals within the field have erupted. There are even cases in which teachers are hired or not hired depending on which of the two views they embrace.

Although most professionals responsible for teaching reading are aware that there is a major issue being debated, it appears to me that many professionals are uncertain or in some cases simply confused about the

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issue. Since there seems to be some confusion as to what this debate is all about, my intent is to clarify the positions held by both sides in this debate.

Names Cause Confusion

Some of the confusion may be attributed to the fact that each of the two sides in this debate goes by a variety of names. For example, Otto (1982) in her article "The New Debate in Reading," refers to one side in the debate as the bottom-up view and the other side as the top-down view. Weaver (1986) refers to the bottom-up view as the word identification view because the focus is on developing word recognition. She refers to the top-down view, which she advocates, as the psycholinguistic approach. Jewel and Zintz (1986) refer to the bottom-up view as the word-centered skills approach and the top-down view as the natural approach to learning to read. Itzkoff (1986) refers to the bottom-up approach as the traditional approach in contrast to top-down view which he refers to as the whole-language approach.

To reduce confusion, I shall refer to one side in the debate as the word-centered skills approach and the other side in the debate as the whole language approach. These designations seem to me to be the most descriptive and they appear to be less prejudicial than such names as bottom-up approach, top-down approach, traditional approach or natural approach.

The Difference

Since both sides in this debate agree that the purpose for reading is to get meaning from print, getting meaning is not the issue. The issue is that the advocates of the various word-centered skills approaches believe that the most efficacious way of enabling readers to get meaning from print is to get them able to recognize an increasing number of words and to provide them with the skills necessary to unlock the words they are not able to recognize. It should be noted that with the word-centered skills approach the focus is on words.

The advocates of the whole language approach believe effective readers see meaning as they read rather than words or parts of words just as listeners hear meaning and not individual words or parts of words. They do not believe that getting meaning from print involves first putting names to words so they can make sense of the print. They believe fluent readers operate within the realm of meaningfulness all of the time. Even when a person is reading orally the proponents of the whole language approach believe that fluent readers see meaning ahead of words and that readers are able to pronounce words because they first see meaning.

Accordingly, whole language teachers seldom focus instruction on words or parts of words. They assist the beginning readers by having them read whole language from the very beginning. Whole language teachers believe that one can best learn to read by reading, and that improvement in reading comes as a result of reading. They contend that any skills that a person needs for

fluent reading are learned from reading. In short, whole language advocates believe that children learn to read from whole to part the same way they learn to speak and listen.

In contrast, the word-centered skills teacher prepares students for getting meaning from print by assisting them in developing their sight vocabularies and helping them to develop skill in using context, structural analysis and phonics to unlock unfamiliar words.

What the Difference is Not

As I said earlier, there are several misconceptions about what the issue really is in this debate. One misconception is that the whole language movement is a swing back to the whole word "look say" approach and a swing away from teaching decoding skills. This, of course, is a misunderstanding. Whole language proponents do not believe in focusing instruction on individual words and they contend that decoding skills, at least those which are actually necessary for reading, are learned from reading.

Another misunderstanding is that whole language means combining writing and reading instruction. Although most whole language teachers integrate beginning reading with writing, this is not what makes their programs whole language. Many teachers who use a word-centered skills approach integrate reading and writing. In fact, writing programs may be either skills based or whole language. It would even be possible to combine a whole language writing program and word-centered skills reading program or vice versa.

Difference in Practice

Whether one is an advocate of the word-centered skills approach or the whole language approach, most agree that if we are to make learning to read easy we must make reading easy from the beginning. However, the way the protagonists of each of the approaches go about making reading easy differ dramatically.

Advocates of the word-centered skills approach believe that learning to read can be made easier by breaking language into smaller bite-sized units such as words and parts of words and teaching these units in a planned sequence which they refer to as systematic skills development . Whole language teachers believe that the skills readers need for reading are learned from reading, therefore, they believe in getting the children engaged in reading (Goodman, 1986). Since whole language teachers believe that readers learn what they need to know about reading from reading, there is no formal scope and sequence of skills.

Workbooks and ditto masters are more likely to be an integral part of a word-centered skills programs than whole language programs because they are often used to teach skills. The two approaches also differ in the way progress is measured. The assessment of reading progress made by students in whole language classrooms tends to be a more global observation while the assessment of reading progress in word-centered skills classrooms usually is aimed at determining whether students have mastered specific skills so those skills that have not been learned may be retaught.

The difference in the two views is also apparent in the selection of reading materials for the young readers. Since the main objective of word-centered skills teachers is to enable readers to recognize words so they can get meaning, they believe in a gradual introduction of new words. This systematic introduction of new words, which is evident in most basal reader programs, is an attempt to make reading easy by controlling vocabulary. The other material that children in word-centered classrooms are given to read usually has a carefully controlled vocabulary in the belief that children become frustrated by being confronted with materials which contain too many unfamiliar words.

In contrast, whole language teachers are not as concerned about the vocabulary as they are with the students' interest in the content and the students' background for reading the content. They believe that they can make most reading materials easy by giving the children sufficient background for reading. Providing background for reading may be as massive as having children read something they have heard read to them several times directly or on tape followed by having the young readers follow the print as the same material is being read to them or as little as selecting materials on topics with which the readers are interested and quite familiar.

Importance of Understanding the Difference

Whole langauge is the policy in New Zealand which has a single national school authority. In Australia, whole language is even more prevailing than the word-centered skills approach is in the United States. The whole

language movement is growing so rapidly in some of the other English-speaking nations, such as Canada and Great Britain, that it appears that whole language will soon become the dominate approach in those countries--if it has not already. Although the whole language movement in the United States has been slowed by the back-to-basics movement, it is apparent that the movement is gaining momentum.

However, the word-centered skills basal reader approach still prevails in the United States. In fact, so dominant is the word-centered skills view that word-centered skills based basal programs are often the only programs given serious consideration for adoption. Even among word-centered skills based programs some programs are not selected because they do not reflect a strong enough emphasis upon decoding skills.

Since this is clearly a debate that is likely to rage at least into the next decade, it seems crucial that educators at all levels understand thoroughly the views held by the combatants on both sides of this issue.

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